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Recognising British bodies: The significance of race and whiteness in ‘post-racial’

Britain

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of race in how nation is articulated by the white middle-classes in “post-racial” Britain. In doing so, it highlights the centrality of bodies and informal markers of difference within processes of national recognition and reveals a normative expectation for British bodies racialised as non-white to perform or inhabit (particular kinds of) whiteness. Bringing insights from post-race theory and advocating a broad conceptualisation of whiteness as a set of relational ideas and codes, the article demonstrates that whiteness continues to shape and underpin dominant conceptions of Britishness – articulated by middle-class white Britons – even as they recognise people of colour individually, and to some extent collectively, as British. Since the role and symbolic power of the white middle-classes is often overlooked in discussions of Britishness, the article makes an important contribution to debates on race and nation, illustrating how whiteness continues to function in allegedly “post-race” societies. It concludes that narrow definitions of race and whiteness allow their continued significance to be under-estimated and ultimately enable the perpetuation of racialised hierarchies of belonging.

Keywords: Britishness, race, whiteness, nation, recognition, middle-class

Introduction

Twenty years since Parekh determined that Britishness had ‘systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations’ (2000: 38), British national identity and the extent to which it includes racialised minorities continues to spark debate. In the UK, these debates are characterised by the mismatched views of differently racialised groups. On the one hand, research with and by people of colour^[1] consistently finds British national identity to be racialised as white and the belonging of British people of colour to be undermined by cultural exclusion, misrecognition, and racism (Gilroy, 1987; Hirsh, 2018; Tufail and Poynting, 2013; Vadher and Barrett, 2009). On the other hand, research conducted with white British people^[2] often finds them asserting that Britishness is excessively inclusive of ethnic

and racial difference (Garner, 2012; 2016) and public opinion data is claimed to show that not only is self-identification relatively high among some racialised groups (Nandi and Platt, 2014) but race has become less relevant to Britishness.^[3] These seemingly contradictory readings illustrate the contested nature of the relationship between race and nation in allegedly “post-racial” societies, which in the UK has found renewed resonance in debates about Brexit (Bhambra 2017; Emejulu, 2016; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

Although less explicitly racialised than Englishness (Byrne, 2006; Leddy-Owen, 2012),^[4] the exclusionary effects of Britishness’ racial connotations are evident in the blanket labelling of black, Asian and Muslim people as migrants (Lentin, 2008; Gilroy, 1987), hyphenation of British-Asian and Black-British identities (Raj, 2003), persistence of colonial discourses (Knowles, 2008; Tyler, 2012), marginalisation of “off-white” migrants (Fox et al., 2012), and routine misrecognition of *British* people of colour as non- or not really- British (Gilroy, 1987; Hirsh, 2018; Vadhwa and Barrett, 2009). Yet, an idea of Britain as “post-racial” has become increasingly dominant since the turn of the century, particularly in narratives around interracial relationships and sport (e.g. Ford et al., 2012), nourishing an illusion of life as no longer shaped by logics of race and racism (Goldberg, 2009).

In “post-racial” Britain, racism assumes ‘new’ ‘seemingly nonracial’ ‘modes of articulation’ (Patel and Connelly, 2019: 4), which *appear* non-racial only because their racial logics have been obscured by ‘the cloak of the “post-racial”’ (ibid. 2). In fact, according to Goldberg (2009: 48), postracial ideology dehistoricises race and racism partly *through* the erasure of ‘referential chains’. The erasure allows racial logics to be reproduced within discourses of, for example, migration and nation that are purportedly *non*-racial, the ‘stain of the racial’ obscured to the point that the racial text is no longer recognised as such (Goldberg, 2009: 48; see also Titley, 2016; Valluvan, 2016).

In this article, I interrogate the relationship between race and nation in “post-racial” Britain through examination of the informal markers of national ‘sameness’ and ‘strangeness’ mobilised by white middle-class British participants during interviews, building on an understanding of recognition as an economy in which people place others by ‘reading the signs on their body, or by reading their body as a sign’ (Ahmed, 2000: 8). The intention is to produce better understanding of the contemporary significance of race to nationhood through critical analysis of its reproduction among people for whom national belonging is generally taken-for-granted (Clarke, 2019; 2020; Skey, 2013; Tyler, 2012). By

focusing on this relatively privileged group, the article responds to calls for research to address the reproduction of belonging within ‘mainstream’ society (Alba and Duyvendak, 2017; Antonsich, 2012; Simonsen, 2016) and critically examine middle-class complicity in racial nationalism (Bhambra, 2017), adding an important counterbalance to claims that racial nationalism is the preserve of the working-classes.

The article proceeds by conceptualising the relationship between whiteness, Britishness and middle-classness, and outlining the research methodology. Acknowledging post-racial ideology’s efforts to obscure race (Goldberg, 2009) and whiteness’ desire to hide (Bhattacharyya et al., 2002), I then examine the informal markers of accent, behaviour, values and dress that white British people interviewed used to distinguish national from non-national. In each case, I remove ‘the cloak of the “post-racial”’ (Patel and Connelly, 2019: 2) to show how these markers were not only read differently in relation to differently racialised bodies, but were themselves racialised through whiteness. In doing so, I demonstrate how, in the making of middle-class whiteness, race continues to frame and underpin dominant understandings of Britishness. The article concludes that narrow public and academic definitions of race and whiteness allow their continued significance to be under-estimated, ultimately enabling the perpetuation of racialised hierarchies of belonging.

Whiteness, Britishness and class

A connection between Britishness and whiteness is rooted in Britain’s imperial history. In defining themselves in relation to whiteness, British imperialists invested it with a power capable of legitimising domination (Bonnett, 2000; Hall, 2002) and, over time, whiteness came to be constructed as normal and superior to the point that progress itself, along with civility, respectability, morality and self-mastery were coded as white (Anderson, 2013; Garner, 2007; Garner, 2012; Lentin, 2008). While the colonised were constructed as ‘black’ (Fanon, 1967), ‘savage’ (Hall, 2002), and in need of white ‘tutelage’ (Lentin, 2008), “the British” were constructed as white and valorised as distinct and superior. In the UK, this construction of Britishness through whiteness – conceived as civility and respectability – was also classed, facilitating the exclusion of working-class people, Jews, Irish, and other “off-white” migrants from the nation, alongside darker-skinned Others (Bonnett, 2000; Virdee, 2014). In this respect, whiteness and class worked together to co-produce a normative white middle-class British

subject. Although Britain's working-classes have since been incorporated into ideas of Britishness – albeit in incomplete and problematic ways (Haylett, 2001) – the white middle-classes continue to occupy positions of 'hegemonic centrality' and 'privileged normality' that allow them to escape the critical gaze (Lawler, 2008: 248).

Today, a connection between Britishness and whiteness continues to be reproduced in the discursive construction of Britain as a nation rather than empire (Bhambra, 2016) and as ethnically homogenous pre-1945 (Hickman, 1998; Virdee, 2014). Meanwhile, the normativity of Britain's white middle-classes is reproduced in discourses of taste and respectability (Tyler, 2012), educational decision-making (Byrne, 2009; Reay et al., 2007), place narratives (Jackson and Benson, 2014), and debates around Brexit (Bhambra, 2017). As a result of these discourses and practices Britain's white middle-classes continue to enjoy a relatively privileged sense of national belonging, routinely represented as the norm against which others are defined (Clarke, 2020; Skey, 2013; Tyler, 2012). And yet, their apparent normativity generally allows such privileges to go unacknowledged. Their's is not a construction of whiteness that tends to attract critical attention (Rollock, 2014; Byrne, 2009).

As the historic exclusion of working-class, Jews and Irish people indicates, whiteness is not about corporeal lightness so much as 'inhabitation' (Ahmed, 2007) and coherence with 'norms of whiteness' (Garner, 2012: 446) that must be produced and sustained (Fox et al., 2012). While social science has often reduced whiteness to skin, assuming that white identities are only available to people of 'exclusively European ancestry' (Twine, 1996: 205), darker bodies can – and do – perform and inhabit whiteness (Knowles, 2003). Moreover, as the racialisation of corporeally white migrants from eastern Europe shows, whiteness is not inherent to white bodies (Fox et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it is usually easier for lighter-skinned and European bodies to be associated with whiteness since they have been constructed as representative of it over centuries (Bhattacharyya et al., 2002), albeit in different ways according to intersections of class and gender (Bonnett, 2000; Byrne, 2006). Thus, while whiteness transcends embodiment, bodies still matter. As Knowles (2003: 184) notes, whiteness is a matter of 'skin in motion around social practices and relationships and places.'

An understanding of whiteness as a set of relational ideas and codes has largely failed to infiltrate the literature on national identity markers and recognition, which tends to conceptualise race and whiteness narrowly, often reducing them to simplistic readings of skin colour and failing to read

the wider extra-corporeal registers through which ideas of whiteness mediate valuations of national identity. In their work, for example, McCrone and Bechhofer (2016: 21) explore whether birthplace, ancestry and accent ‘matter more’ than ‘skin colour or race’, treating these different identity markers as discrete and disembodied, and thereby obscuring the racialised logics that inform perceptions of birthplace, ancestry and accent. While McCrone and Bechhofer’s work has tended to rely on survey data (see also Kiely et al., 2001), other recent work on the perception of nationhood places embodied encounters at the centre of analysis (Antonsich, 2018; Erdal and Strømsø, 2018). Antonsich (2018) and Erdal and Strømsø (2018) both find race to be significant within economies of national recognition. However, their corporeal conceptualisations of race – as primarily about skin – again risk obscuring the wider significance of whiteness to Italianness and Norwegianness, respectively.

Building on and expanding the literature on race, nation and class, this article makes two important contributions. First, in drawing out the racial nature of seemingly non-racial discourse, it makes a theoretical contribution to literature on national identity and belonging which, in conceptualising race and whiteness as skin colour, has tended to under-estimate their continued significance. Second, the article’s empirical focus works to redirect analytical attention away from the overt white nationalism of far-right movements and problematised nationalism of a reified “white working-class”, onto the more subtle – but nonetheless powerful – buttressing of whiteness among Britain’s white middle-classes. In doing so, the article adds weight to recent arguments about middle-class complicity in racial nationalism (Bhambra, 2017; Valluvan, 2019), while contributing new empirical data on the *modus operandi* by which whiteness is sustained in allegedly “post-racial” societies.

Researching constructions of nation through white British narratives

This paper is based on interviews with white British adults in northeast London and west Essex, conducted as part of a doctoral study on hierarchies of national belonging. The area has a large and well-established (British)-Asian population, a sizeable, albeit declining, Jewish population, and foreign-born population of 8-22%, making it a useful location to study postcolonial nationhood. Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted multiple interviews with 26 men and women aged 30-75, all of whom had had British citizenship from birth and identified in some way with Britishness. Recruitment materials invited

‘ordinary Britons’ (rather than white middle-class people) to explore ideas of Britishness and national belonging, yet only people who fitted within this group responded, reflecting the normativity of white middle-classness. Initially, participants were self-selecting, responding to flyers and posts in local forums, while later participants were purposively sampled through local connections to produce a more age and gender-balanced sample. All participants were interviewed at least twice. The first interview focused on participants’ lives, including experiences of migration and local change, the second on more substantive questions of nation and belonging.^[5] Interviews were flexibly structured to allow the conversation to follow participants’ conceptual links and, where possible, third interviews allowed space for reflection and clarification. Verbatim transcripts were analysed using thematic and narrative analysis, the latter looking beyond *what* people say to *how* and *why*. Participants were given copies of the transcripts and opportunity to discuss them. This was important given the research’s potential to challenge participants’ sense of self, particularly around questions of race (Byrne, 2006).

Participants were all corporeally ‘white’ in that they had lighter skin. Some looked confused when I asked about their ethnicity and seemed to assume that I could see it, suggesting conceptual conflation of race and ethnicity and corporeal understanding of race. However, while participants generally accepted their whiteness (only one Jewish man in his fifties queried it) their whiteness was not uniform but heterogeneous, and was differently constructed and performed across intersections of age and gender. While articulations of class varied, participants were broadly recognisable as middle-class, characterised by engagement in processes of distinction, narratives of individual agency, and the capacity to establish/maintain their lives and values as normative (Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2004). In practice, they represented the broad heterogeneity of middle-classness (Bacqué et al., 2015), some coming from aspirational working-class backgrounds and others more established middle-class ones. With one exception, the participants self-identified as middle-class and, importantly in the context of this research, their middle-classness worked with whiteness in producing normative Britishness.

Contrary to findings from southwest England (Garner, 2016), the majority of participants articulated positive views about multiculturalism, reflecting the value typically afforded to multicultural competencies among London’s white middle-classes (Jackson and Benson, 2014; Reay et al., 2007). Most participants expressed clear distaste of racism – from which they distanced themselves – and several people suggested that darker-skinned migrants faced greater barriers to inclusion. Although

usually part of a performative critique of racism, such comments imply an awareness of the privilege that white skin afforded within processes of national belonging. Yet, the participants – with one exception – still asserted that being British was not about being white. Participants' comments about race and nation must also be considered in relation to my own identities as a young white British woman from the same research area, since these will inevitably have affected participants' narratives, as well as my interpretations of them. In some cases, shared geography and membership of Britain's white middle classes seemed to encourage participants to open up; however, it could also increase awareness of other differences, including age and politics.

Racialised markers of nationhood

Having outlined the research's methodology, this section examines the significance of race in how nation was articulated by the middle-class participants, focusing on the informal markers of accent, behaviours, values and dress they mobilised during interviews, and through which ideas of national sameness/strangeness were read and reproduced. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the role of race, in terms of the assumptions made about, and expectations placed on, differently racialised bodies, and the way that bodily markers of Britishness were imbricated with racial logics that reproduced whiteness as normal and superior, even while presenting as non-racial.

(1) Accent

Although recognition is usually understood as a visual economy, economies of recognition are also audible with language and accent often treated as easily recognisable indicators of territoriality and 'unproblematic guide[s] to... nationality' (Kiely et al., 2001: 38). During the interviews, English language often featured in conversations about immigrant integration. However, the *way* English was spoken appeared equally, if not more important as a marker of nationhood, including things like accent, tone and pronunciation, as well as what Ian^[6] – a man in his sixties, originally from the north of England – described as 'subtleties of language.'

With English so widely and fluently spoken around the world, accent appeared to have become an important marker of nationhood, providing a relatively easy way for many racially minoritised

Britons to be recognised as national. As Roz – a woman in her sixties who identified as a Londoner and described herself as ‘culturally Jewish’ – explained:

I think it's from television, from the media. You... I mean you've got right the way across the board interviewers now, and if they've got an English accent it...they're not perceived as any, any different, at all. Not even, you don't even see the colour.

Roz's comments seem to reflect what Virdee et al. (2006: 3) identify as accent's ability to indicate that a ‘racialised referent [name, skin etc.] may have less salience.’ However, in adhering to post-race ideology – ‘you don't even see the colour’ – Roz obscured the racialised exclusions that characterise Britain's cultural industries, drawing attention to the inclusion of *individual* black and brown bodies, while overlooking the hegemonic whiteness of British media (Saha, 2018).

Although Roz talked of an ‘English accent,’ it was often local or regional accents that most securely positioned people as national (Antonsich, 2018; Scully, 2013), and several participants used the strong regional accents of British people of colour to authenticate their belonging. Despite apparently inclusivist intentions, such comments often had an undercurrent of amusement. Yet, these encounters did not seem to constitute a ‘crisis of reading’ (cf. Antonsich, 2018: 454) and surprise at the British accents of people of colour was never expressed in interviews. While this may reflect experiences of everyday multiculturalism and proximity to London, it may also reflect participants' desire to perform multicultural competencies and open-mindedness during interviews (Jackson and Benson, 2014; Reay et al., 2007). Indeed, on a couple of occasions during my fieldwork, I did witness white British surprise at the regional accents of people of colour (particularly accents associated with more rural areas), suggesting that British accents are still naturalised to white bodies in a way that they are not naturalised to black and brown ones (Hage, 1998: 62).

Although accent enabled participants to avoid explicit race-talk, it is important to note that language and accent are not race-neutral (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), and the association between white skin and British/English accents is not simply because of the predominance of white people. As Fortier (2018) explains, British-English was racialised as white through imperialists' hierarchical distinction between “the English” and “the anglicised” so that, even if people of colour became ‘proportionately

whiter' as they 'mastered' the language (Fanon, 1967), the language refused to naturalise to their bodies in the way that it naturalised to corporeally white ones.

The differential naturalisation of language and accent was also suggested in some people's surprise at the audible difference of corporeally white migrants. Below, for example, it is surprise at difference rather than sameness, that marks Dani – a woman in her forties who grew up locally –'s narrated encounter with corporeally white eastern Europeans:

I'll walk down the street and I'll smile at somebody or say something to somebody and I think that they're gonna respond in English and they don't, or they've got a very thick accent, you know. So it's only when they talk that a lot of the east European people... because they look exactly like us anyway so you wouldn't know – Dani

Here, the unexpectedness of white Europeans' audible difference demonstrates how accents are embodied (Creese and Kambere, 2003), with racialised ideas of nationhood shaping assumptions about about who is (and is not) part of the national community (Antonsich, 2018). While people of colour may only be recognised as national when they signal nationhood through accent, corporeally white Others were assumed to be national until signalled otherwise (Hickman et al., 2005). That this was the case so close to London demonstrates the persistence of the white national 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004), as well as the limited potential of everyday encounters to destabilise it (Antonsich, 2018; cf. Virdee et al., 2006). In Dani's case, the white somatic norm was also reproduced through her discursive construction of a white national "us" – 'they look exactly like us' – against which white migrants and people of colour (citizen and not) were differently positioned.

(2) Behaviours

Although participants acknowledged the diversity within Britishness, there was a general assumption that nationals would have a common culture, share cultural and childhood references, and have broadly similar responses to things. While not universal, some habits and behaviours were also suggested as characteristic of British people, including over-apologising, social awkwardness, and a particular sense of humour. In theory, these apparently national behaviours did not exclude British people of colour. However, in practice, they worked to normalise a hegemonic white middle-classness characterised by reserve and propriety (Tyler, 2012; Garner, 2012).

Nations are reproduced, among other things, through the embodied practices of everyday life (Edensor, 2002) and the performance of nationhood is, therefore, not only about *what* people do and *how* (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) but also *who* is doing the doing. Reflecting this, participants' narratives suggested that behaviours were only perceived through a national frame when performed by bodies already recognised as Other, including ostensibly white eastern European bodies. Below, for example, Ann and Harold articulate the national otherness of eastern European friends through behaviours:

When [we] go out to dinner, I'm embarrassed with the way she treats staff and stuff because it's just very direct. It's like 'I don't like this drink. Go and take it away. Bring...' But that's the way... that is the way they behave. You know, she's Polish; they're very direct – Ann (50s)

I can remember [her] saying that, you know, it's quite common in Bosnia to ask somebody how much they earn [...] it's not regarded as being private. I said, 'Well,' you know, 'people would be mortified!' – Harold (60s)

In these quotes, Ann and Harold both seem to distinguish between “respectable” normative Britishness and less-“civilised” eastern European Others. Although it presents as a cultural or classed boundary, the boundary is also racialised, reflecting an understanding of Eastern European people as ‘not-quite-white’, or at least not white like “us” (Fox et al., 2012). As Moore (2013) explains, classed norms of whiteness are central to the reproduction of boundaries between ostensibly white people and serve to protect the hegemonic whiteness of the middle-classes.

While some participants talked about public behaviours, economies of recognition also extended into the intimate space of the home (Gedalof, 2007) and the importance of cultural norms relating to family life was particularly evident in comments about British Asians. Below, for example, Rob and Ann position British Asian families as separate from ‘the British’ due to perceived cultural differences in home life:^[7]

I suppose Indians, there is, they love big families don't they and they all invite everyone in, even... Well that's kind of happening in this country in the fact that when people buy a house they're not just buying a house for their-, for them and their kids. They're buying a house to then build three storeys high so that there's six bedrooms and they then can invite the granny

in, and the kids, and the aunts [...] I don't particularly think that's a very British value – Rob (30s)

They all live together though, which I don't... With the British it would be like World War wouldn't it? God if my dad was here he'd be in the cupboard under the stairs with the cat, you know! – Ann (50s)

While for Rob and Ann the perceived differences of British Asians' home lives positioned them as *nationally* Other, this was not always the case. Such differences often positioned British Asians as *differently* British rather than *non*-British (cf. Tyler, 2012: 438).^[8] Even so, it was clear that the more someone was seen to be moving toward or proximate to normative white middle-classness – characterised by ideas of reserve, respectability and decorum – the more likely they were to be recognised as national. As Fortier (2007: 116) explains, the racialised Other's skin may be 'peeled' when they display what are perceived to be white English/British, and in this case middle-class, behaviours or attitudes.

Although participants were often adamant that it is how people behave that makes someone British, not who they are or what they look like, in practice, deviance from normative white middle-class behaviours only marked someone as *nationally* Other when coupled with other markers, or prior knowledge, of national difference. It is, in other words, not the behaviour itself that marks someone as non-British but the *co-presence* of behaviour and body. This distinction is especially significant for British people of colour – certainly more than for the presumably white European migrants discussed above – since British people of colour live with the 'trailing risk' of being perceived or revealed as "foreign", their national belonging continually at risk of being denied or undermined (Valluvan, 2018: 452). Thus, for black and brown Britons, deviance from normative national cultural codes, whether through social directness, multigenerational living, or some equally arbitrary practice, puts them at risk of being marked out and *mis*-recognised as "foreign". The same behaviours performed by white British bodies might simply be read as eccentric, odd, or rude.

(3) Values

After 2001, and with increased intensity after the 2005 London bombings, UK government policy shifted its focus to the promotion of shared a British national identity and values, around which the

nation could “come together” and to which minorities were expected to assimilate (Kundnani, 2007). Although some participants ridiculed the political discourse of British Values, many nonetheless saw values as a way of recognising non-national Others. In some cases, these values reflected the political conception of British Values as freedom, tolerance, responsibility, respect and rule of law; in others, they drew on traditional ideas of neighbourliness, home, and family. Yet, in both cases, values were racialised; the first through liberal and civilisational discourses, the second through conservative and nostalgic discourses (Valluvan, 2019).

In recognising Britishness, participants had to rely on signifiers of values, among which gendered practices appeared particularly salient. Several participants were critical of other nations’ patriarchal systems and constructed national Others against British gender equality. This was particularly true when it came to Muslims, reflecting the centrality of gender and Islam within public debates about a “conflict” of values (Bilge, 2010; Phillips and Saharso, 2008). Below, for example, Linda and Zoe both suggest that women “here” have more rights and freedoms than the ‘immigrant’ and/or ‘Muslim’ women to which they refer: ^[9]

The way women are treated here, they’re equal. [...] Having worked in the East End of London, yeah, the way... the way a lot of the women, immigrant women, there are treated by the men [...] they can’t speak for themselves and, I don’t know, women here have got used to going out to work and having their own independence – Linda (50s)

Women having to wear the ashraf [sic], I think that's totally incompatible with our society actually [...]. But that's because from their culture they haven't won the wars on women's rights, you see. [...] They still feel like they've got to wrap... well the women themselves feel like they've got to cover up – Zoe (40s)

Although neither Linda nor Zoe claimed that gender equality had been perfectly achieved in the UK, both positioned themselves as free and enlightened British women against an implicitly non-Western Muslim Other. In doing so, they constructed the Muslim Other as un-, or imperfectly, British because “they” lack the agency that “we”, supposedly, have.

Linda and Zoes’ comments both reflected and reproduced public and political discourses that essentialise Muslim women as ‘in need of empowerment’ and ‘victims of oppression’ (Rashid, 2016: xiii). Although these discourses operate at the national level, they also connect to global discourses that

reproduce ‘civilisational boundaries’ around “the West” (Bilge, 2010: 9). At both scales, these discourses are racialised with freedom and individuality coded as white (Garner, 2007). However, whiteness also operated through the civilizational and saviourist language used to discuss other people and cultures, evident in Zoe’s suggestion that Muslim women are yet to ‘win the war’ and subsequent comment that ‘we’ve got to support them as much as we can.’ This kind of moralising whiteness was also clear in other participants’ “legitimate concerns” about FGM, which worked to emphasise the speaker’s morality and tolerance (within reasonable limits). Since morality and tolerance are not only historically constructed as white (Anderson, 2013; Garner, 2007) but work to reinforce the power of white people in the present by justifying *their* concerns as legitimate (Brown, 2006), these seemingly race-neutral values must also be understood through the lens of whiteness.

Although values were often put forward as the basis of Britishness and sometimes used to justify exclusion, as with behaviours, this only applied to bodies already recognised as Other. Patriarchal or misogynist views among people assumed to be, or recognised as, British did not make *them* any less British. It was not, therefore, that supporting gender equality made someone recognisably British, but that not doing so *in association with other markers of difference* could position someone as exogenous to the nation (Valluvan, 2019). Below, for example, Ivy suggests that the perceived distance between her gender identity and that of a Bengali client made it hard for her to comprehend any shared identity as British women:

She never, ever went out. Never. And her... I said, you know ‘Who does the shopping?’ ‘Oh my husband does that.’ So she didn't do anything. All she did was have children and keep the house, keep this very, very poor house in some semblance of order. And you think, ‘Oh my god’ [...] But she could be saying that she's British; she probably was... – Ivy (60s).

That the difference was narrated in national terms was perhaps a result of the research topic; however, it nonetheless suggests that the woman’s body already carried the potential to be read as “foreign”. How would the story have been narrated if she was not *already* racialised as Other?

(4) Dress

During the interviews, dress emerged as one way of reading a person’s culture and values, albeit an unreliable one. For example, according to Gareth – a Jewish man in his 70s who had moved to Essex

from East London – Asian men who wear ‘western suits’ were more likely to be recognised as British than those who did not. Although he described them as ‘people from India or Pakistan,’ it is likely that many of the men he was referring to in this context are the British-born descendants of migrants:

People from India and Pakistan and things like that, they stick to their tradition of saris and they will not be accepted as, erm, a British person by the British. They'll... You know, they'll stick out like a sore thumb and British people will not sort of say, erm, you know accept them as British. But the ones that have... You know if you go into the City of London where a lot of people from India or Pakistan wear western suits, and shirts and ties, they're, they're easily acceptable by the people.

Similarly, John – a Jewish man in his 50s – described how his elderly mother saw South Asian dress as antithetical to Britishness, something he found ironic given her migrant ancestry:

[My mother] still doesn't quite get the idea that someone who is Asian [and] walks around in a sari is as British as she is. And it's really ironic because, you know, obviously I've told you that we're Jewish, and you know... There probably is... You know my mother's mother came over from Poland so... there's no difference.

Of course, the use of dress to distinguish between people is not new. Dress was routinely used within colonial projects to hierarchically distinguish between coloniser and colonised, with non-European dress constructed as “traditional” and “cultural” against the “modern” universality of European dress. Dress, then, is not race neutral but ‘imbued with racial connotations’ so that the racialised Other comes to be seen – at least in part – *through* their attire (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 88).

Despite the examples above, in the vast majority of cases, dress alone was insufficient to position someone outside Britishness. As Karen (50s) explained, ‘That they dress differently or eat different foods doesn't make them any less British.’ Dress might suggest where someone is from but, as an adaptable surface marker, it was not seen as a reliable marker of nationhood, and was certainly weaker than markers that were thought to be fixed (e.g. accent). However, while a person’s dress was unlikely to write them out the national community of belonging altogether, in the eyes of the white middle-class participants it could mark them out as ‘different’, as more or less British, or as hybrid (British-and-something-else), especially in the case of racialised Others. Indeed, as Joseph-Salisbury (2018) explains, dress is always read in relation to bodies, with lighter skin permitting more flexibility.

While a sartorial line between “us” and “them” was not, by definition, one of nation, it could become so where dress operates as a racialised extension of the body. Reflecting wider discourses about Muslim women, within which the hijab and other headwear operate as racialised signifiers of backwardness, oppression and submissiveness (Fortier, 2007; Bilge, 2010), participants’ objections to Islamic dress were usually about what it was thought to symbolise. Karen – a woman in her fifties who had travelled across the Middle East – had particularly strong views about face-coverings:

Very happy to wear a headscarf in Iran, that didn't bother me at all; it was showing respect for their traditions. But I do not like the face-coverings. I think that is totally anti-English, anti-British, it's anti-European, it's anti-civilisation. [...] I try to accept her right to do it. But I find it's, you know... I don't think her right to wear it is as strong as a normal community to demand that we, in our society, do not cover our faces.

According to Karen, women’s freedom was important but more important was the fact that “we” do not cover our faces. Although she fully accepted Islamic dress “there” (in the Middle East), Karen did not agree with face-coverings, especially “here” (in the UK). Her separation of “here” and “there” also implied the persistence of a host/guest metaphor according to which Muslim women are positioned as guests who enjoy (but abuse) “our” hospitality, rather than as citizens/residents with sartorial agency (Bilge, 2010). This possessive sense of national belonging and entitled right to have a say over what is/is not acceptable is indicative of middle-class whiteness (Hage, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and in practice works to reproduce existing racialised hierarchies of belonging.

Conclusion: Sustaining and perpetuating racialised hierarchies of belonging

While participants’ emphasis on ‘seemingly non-racial’ markers of nationhood (Patel and Connolly, 2019: 2) – accent, behaviours, values, and dress – could be read as supporting the post-racial idea that race has lost its significance within dominant constructions of British nationhood, this article demonstrates that such a reading is too simplistic. Not only were the informal markers used to recognise people as British read differently in relation to differently racialised bodies, but the markers themselves were also racialised through whiteness. This is not to say that belonging in and/or to Britain is always or necessarily drawn along colour lines, nor that only corporeally white people can be recognised and included as British. Rather, it is to say that whiteness itself – as a set of relational ideas and codes –

remains fundamental to how Britishness is imagined so that the closer someone appears to the ‘norms of whiteness’ (Garner, 2012: 446), and the more able/willing they are to ‘inhabit whiteness’ (Ahmed, 2007: 153), the more likely they are to be recognised as British.

While individual people of colour can be, and often are, recognised as British by members of Britain’s white middle-classes, the fact that whiteness has been naturalised onto white bodies over centuries means that people of colour continue to face higher barriers to recognition than their white counterparts, whose Britishness is also less fragile. The fact that those black and brown Britons most easily recognised as British are also those who perform and/or inhabit middle-class whiteness further illustrates the centrality of whiteness, since it is precisely through the performance and inhabitation of middle-class whiteness that these Britons come to be recognised as British. The incorporation of black and brown bodies has not significantly altered the white ‘face of the nation’ (Ahmed, 2000: 189) and Britishness continues to be ‘oriented “around”’ whiteness, even as people of colour are included individually, and to some extent collectively, as British (Ahmed, 2007: 158).

In empirically documenting the ways that whiteness is embedded and reproduced in white middle-class narratives of national self and other, this article has drawn critical attention to the complicity of Britain’s white middle-classes in the reproduction of racialised hierarchies of national belonging. In doing so, it makes a valuable contribution to the sociology of race and nation – which has often overlooked the discursive and symbolic power of the white middle-classes – and challenges both a post-racial imagining of Britain and Britishness as ‘somehow de-racialised’ (Leddy-Owen, 2014: 1) and widespread anxiety – critically documented by Garner (2016), and uncritically reproduced in the wake of Brexit by others (e.g. Kaufmann, 2018) – about the marginalisation of white British people. By highlighting the wider extra-corporeal registers through which whiteness mediates valuations of national belonging, the article also makes a conceptual contribution, demonstrating the importance of employing broad definitions in research on race and whiteness if we are to recognise that which is obscured by ‘the cloak of the “post-racial”’ (Patel and Connelly, 2019: 2). This is particularly important in research on whiteness where narrow definitions not only obscure the pervasiveness and centrality of whiteness but, in allowing it to stay hidden, may facilitate the perpetuation of racialised hierarchies of belonging within white middle-class society and beyond.

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Notes

[1] The term ‘people of colour’ usefully refers to individuals and groups who experience racism without reifying racial categories (Benson and Lewis, 2019) but is criticised for flattening divergent experiences of racism. Given this, I refer to specific groups where that is more accurate.

[2] White British people are labelled as such to counter their universalisation rather than to suggest that their whiteness is fixed or natural.

[3] In 2002, Ipsos MORI reported that ‘86% of the British public disagree that to be truly British you have to be white’ and, in 2007, the Commission for Racial Equality found 72% disagreeing that ‘to be truly British you have to be white’. Such statistics must, however, be understood in the context of surveys offering opportunities to select “correct” answers. When race was replaced with ‘ancestry’ in 2014, 51% agreed that ‘British ancestry’ was important for being ‘truly British’ (Kiss and Park, 2014).

[4] Englishness is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that for all participants (as in previous research) Englishness carried more explicit racial connotations than Britishness (Byrne, 2006; Leddy-Owen, 2012).

[5] In one case, this continued over two sessions.

[6] All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

[7] Although Ann does not mention British Asians in the quote, this was the context in which she was speaking.

[8] The difference from Tyler’s work (2012) may reflect the sizeable local British Asian population.

[9] More than 40% of residents in the area where Linda works identified as Muslim in 2011.

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